

Justice

Chapter 1

The Astral Drake

Outer Rim

41 ABY

Draca *tried* to ignore the screams.

The vibrant wailing from above him in the cockpit of the ship shook his bones and rattled his core. If he were perfectly honest with himself, he didn't know how long it had been, nor did he desire to find out. Anders was, and always had been, very particular about not being interrupted during his *work*. Instead, Draca kept himself to himself in his private living quarters on the ship, trying to block out the noise via whatever means possible. After the third *blood-curdling* scream, he had given up on reading and moved on to his favourite podracing hologame in the living area, the latest game in the series with upgraded vehicle customisation and character unlocks! He was practically giddy with excitement at the thought of playing it!

Maybe the noise and dynamic holographic screen integration would help distract him?

It was certainly better than being cooped up in his room right now.

"AAAGGGHHH!"

Alas, it was not. Each terrifying howl from above made Draca stiffen, forcing the hairs on his arms standing on end as he lost concentration for a moment, only a moment, and yet, it was enough to crash his podracer into the canyon wall.

"Are you kidding me!?" Draca leapt to his feet, slamming his palms into the table. The shrieks continued like cries from a banshee, unending, and grinding on his nerves.

"WILL YOU..."

Draca stopped himself, and took a deep breath, centering himself. Anders *did not* like interruptions, he reminded himself of that. He didn't want to receive a

punishment for disobeying direct orders. Most of the time, Draca was the perfect apprentice. He was loyal, studious, and *powerful* in the Force, at least according to Anders. Everything anyone would ever want in a student, Draca had it in spades. Yet, it was hard to sit back and listen to the suffering, the unending cries, and the *torture* without doing anything about it. It tore at his consciousness like nails screeching down a chalkboard. He knew what Anders was doing, of course he did. He'd been under the Chiss' care for eleven years, and he understood better than most the reasons *why* Anders did what he did, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

"AAAAGGGHHHH!"

They were getting louder. *How* were they getting louder!?! Draca covered his ears with his hands and shook his head. It was like the walls were closing in around him, the air becoming thicker, and harder to breathe.

'Happy thoughts, Draca, happy thoughts...'

He needed to do something...

Water.

He needed a glass of water whilst he figured it out. He took a large glass from the kitchen, filling it, and taking a sip of the cool liquid as it soothed his throat.

It was like the Force itself answered his prayers when he returned to the living area. There was a call coming through, and Anders was likely too... preoccupied... to answer.

Draca eagerly answered the call without a moment's hesitation. A blue-tinted holographic image of a Weequay woman materialised in front of him. Despite the worn lines of her face, she carried a certain femininity about her. She was dressed prim and proper, holding a certain command of respect about her in a way that reminded Draca of Anders. The thing that struck the Jedi most, however, was the silver glint in her grey eyes.

"Chief Inquisitor Anderson, I-" the Weequay said before taking note of Draca in front of her. "Who are you?"

Draca felt a lump form in his throat under her intense gaze. Regardless, he stood tall. "Draca Zul, ma'am."

"I see, and where is Chief Inquisitor Anderson?"

"Up in the cockpit."

"Well, Draca. If it's not too much trouble, would you mind getting him for me? I'd like to have a word with him."

Draca bit the corner of his lip. "Unfortunately, he's busy right now. Can I... take a message?"

The Weequay woman scrunched her face, baring her teeth at Draca.

"A message!? A *message*!? What is he doing that is so important that-"

"AAAAAAAGGGGGHHHHH!"

Draca winced. The scream seemed to drag on for an eternity, even if in reality it was only a few seconds. He cautiously made eye contact with the Weequay woman.

"I-I am so sorry about that," Draca scrambled for a reasonable explanation. "That was-"

The Weequay held up a hand. "I'm well aware of what that was, thank you very much. Now, I'd like you to go and tell him *Silver Eyes* would like to talk with him. If he's not in front of me in the next three minutes, then there will be consequences. Well, what are you waiting for? Go on, time is ticking."

Draca didn't need to be told twice. He leapt towards the elevator, slamming his hand on the button that opened the doors. They opened with a *swoosh*, allowing him to step inside. He had no idea who that lady was, but no punishment Anders could deliver was worth dealing with her alone.

Chapter 2

The Astral Drake

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The elevator took seconds to reach the cockpit from the living area, and it was long enough for Draca to regret his decision. The smell of burned flesh seeped into the lift before the doors could open. Once they did, Draca stepped forward into the wide open space that was the Star Courier's cockpit.

A row of five seats sat in the middle of the circular space, with the pilot's chair in front of them. The one occupying that seat was none other than;

"Anders!" Draca called out to him, alerting crimson-red eyes to his presence. As the young Jedi approached, the toasted smell became more intense, more intolerable.

He hadn't seen the tiny figure sitting in the seat opposite Anders until he was up close and personal. An Ugnaught male, if it could be recognised as one. Their pale flesh had been charred a darker colour. Blood-stained lips and dry eyes slowly peered at Draca as the young Jedi noticed the missing hand the Ugnaught had.

A nauseous wave struck Draca when he found the missing appendage on the floor beside his foot.

"P-Please..." the Ugnaught raised his weak, feeble hand to Draca. "Help... me..."

Anders had his hand out towards the Ugnaught's head. Draca had seen it before, and it always unnerved him how Anders was able to pry into the deepest parts of someone's mind to get the information he wanted.

Draca leaned closer to the poor Ugnaught, his instinct to help others in need had always been too strong. He gasped as the Force alarmed him, a klaxon going off in his subconscious like the ripples of an ocean wave. The next thing he knew, he soared back towards the lift at great speed, his back crashing into the doors with a spine-rattling *thud*.

He fought through the pain, managing to stay upright and catch a glimpse of Anders' outstretched hand towards him as realisation dawned on him. A light beeping sounded in his ear, drawing Draca's attention to a set of nearby terminals.

"Buddy?" he asked, getting a low beep in response. The little droid's sensors were primed on the scene unfolding before his eyes.

It was being recorded.

Anders rose from his seat, not sparing a single glance at Draca. "The boy will not save you. No-one will save you. You are going to die here today. Whether your death is slow and agonising, or quick and painless is up to you."

"I don't... please... I told you everything...they... threatened my family. I have spoke-" The Ugnaught wailed, then began clutching at his throat.

"And they destroyed families of many more across the Brotherhood. Your allegiance to the Children of Mortis is disgusting at best, and downright atrocious at worst. Regardless of your reasons, your actions are partially responsible for the deaths of thousands across Brotherhood territories."

Draca watched as the Uгнаught was lifted out of his seat, still clutching their throat as they were suspended in the air.

"Anders!" He called out to him.

Mercifully, the Uгнаught was dropped to the ground. He curled into a foetal ball, tears streaming from their eyes.

Anders towered over them, electricity cackling at his fingertips. "If you have nothing more to say, then I am done with you. Goodbye."

A stream of blue fury erupted from the Chiss' hands, coiling around the Uгнаught like the torturous web of a krykna. The Uгнаught writhed on the floor, their eyes rolling into the back of their head. Anders struck them again, and again, and again, seething, hissing, never satisfied at the twitching, frothing form of the Uгнаught at his feet.

"Anders!" This time Draca rushed him, grabbing him by one of his arms. "That's enough! Can't you see he's dead!?"

Mercifully, Anders stopped, his breathing ragged with sweat dripping from his brow.

Draca breathed a sigh of relief. He relaxed his grip on the older man before suddenly feeling a hard telekinetic tug from the Force. He landed in the same chair the Uгнаught had been in moments prior.

Anders stood in front of him, a scowl present on his face as he placed his hands behind his back. "What is my *one* rule?"

"Don't interrupt your work," Draca responded like a monotonous machine, the response instinctual. He watched Anders carefully as he began to pace back and forth in front of him.

"Then why do you insist on making things more difficult for yourself than they have to be? I care about you, Draca. I don't ask a lot. I merely ask for understanding, the same understanding that I have shown you."

"Anders, we got a call and..."

The Chiss raised a hand to him, silencing him. "And why could you not tell them to call back? Or just ignore it altogether?"

"Anders, there--"

Anders stopped in front of him, leaning his face towards him. "What was so important about that call that you felt the need to break my *one* rule?"

"If you shut up for a minute, I'll tell you!" Draca immediately clasped his hands over his mouth. BUDD-E let out a low whimper beside him, fearfully backing away from the scene.

What had he just done?

He *never* snapped at Anders!

'No, no, no, no, NO!'

Judging by the Chiss' response, he didn't expect it either. He went slack-jawed for a single moment before standing to his full height. Draca felt uncomfortable, his hearts gut-wrenchingly heavy. For all his flaws, Draca never truly believed Anders was a bad person. Extreme, yes, but never *bad*. Most of the time his *subjects* deserved it.

Most of the time...

Anders folded his hands across his chest. "You *better* have a good explanation. Or *else*."

Draca fought against averting his gaze, summoning the resolve required to mutter two words;

"*Silver Eyes*."

He was expecting some sort of reprimand, a punishment, *anything* other than the look of raw, genuine fear on Anders' face. The Chief Inquisitor stiffened, swallowing the lump that formed in his throat.

"Right, well..." Anders let out a small cough and brushed himself down, tidying up his attire. BUDD-E hopped up onto his shoulder, nestling its head into it as a small measure of comfort. He gave Draca a hard glare.

"We will talk about this later."

Chapter 3

The Astral Drake

Outer Rim

41 ABY

"Ten minutes, and twenty-three seconds. That's more than triple the time I granted you, young man."

The Weequay woman, now identified to Draca as Ness'arin Ohnaka courtesy of Anders back in the lift, folded her arms across her chest, a frown adorning her face.

Draca felt his hearts race against one another in his chest, shifting from foot to foot nervously. Kriffing hell, this woman was *intense*.

"I do apologise, ma'am," Anders lowered his head slightly in a courteous bow. "It is entirely my fault. I was preoccupied with finishing up some important business."

"Yes, I heard very clearly," Ness'arin scoffed. "Need I remind you that the target was to be taken to Arx for further interrogation?"

"No need," Anders smiled at her. "I have taken care of the matter personally."

"That was *not* your objective," Ness'arin scowled, shooting Anders an icy glare, the temperature in the room dropping. "Your mission was to capture the target alive and bring him back to Arx. Nothing more, nothing less. I want you to bring the target to Arx immediately for interrogation and mind probing."

Draca bit his bottom lip, his blue eyes darting back and forth between Anders and Ness'arin.

"I'm afraid that is no longer possible," Anders maintained eye contact, sweat forming on his brow.

Draca could have cut the sudden tension between them with a vibroknife.

"Chief Inquisitor Anderson," Ness'arin spoke slowly, methodically, and piercingly. "Please tell me the target is not dead..."

"I'm afraid that is not possible. He is dead."

Ness'arin bared her teeth like fangs, her pupils dilating. Draca got the feeling that if she could have, she would have reached through the holoprojector and strangled Anders where he stood. It was a good thing she wasn't Force-sensitive...

"That was not your decision to make!" she snarled through her teeth.

"I made a judgement based on the circumstances of his involvement with an enemy of the Brotherhood. Justice was served."

"Justice that you had no authority to carry out! You had a mission to complete and you blatantly ignored your directive to carry out your personal vendetta. It is not the first time you have done so, and your blatant lack of respect has caught the attention of Lord Adenn."

Anders' went wide-eyed, causing Ness'arin's lips to curve into a smirk.

"Yes, Anderson. The Voice. He wishes to speak with you personally. You are to make your way to his office in the Dark Ascent on Arx. You better pray he's in a good mood. He might not be as willing to look the other way regarding your activities as I have been."

The blue-hued image of Ness'arin vanished, allowing Anders to release the breath he was holding. The Chiss placed his hands on the table and lowered his head. BUDDE-E, still on his shoulder, leaned in, whimpering softly in a low tone.

"Yes, Buddy. I am fine..."

Draca was not convinced in the slightest about that. He followed his instincts, carefully taking a few cautious steps towards him.

"Anders, what are we going to do?" he asked.

"We?" Anders scoffed. "We are not going to do anything. I am going to go and speak with the Voice and clear this up."

"Have you ever spoken with him?"

Anders shook his head. "No. Most of the Inquisitorius operate out in the field. We receive our objectives and are expected to complete them. The honour of speaking with the Voice himself is *usually* reserved for Ness'arin herself and the Grand Inquisitors."

Draca bit his bottom lip, his eyes darting towards the floor. He began to pace back and forth. There had to be a way out of this. There just had to be! In the eleven years he'd known Anders, there had been *nothing* that they couldn't handle together, and that wasn't about to start now.

"What's your plan?" Draca asked. Anders always had a plan, something up his sleeves in times like this.

Always.

"My plan?" Anders placed a hand under his chin. "The Voice is a Mandalorian. I will appeal to his sense of honour and explain the reasoning for my decisions. Hopefully, we will see eye-to-eye and I will be allowed to leave."

Draca raised a brow. "And if that doesn't work?"

Anders forced himself upright. "Then I pray for a miracle from the Force because I certainly won't find one any other way. Buddy, if you will?"

The little droid hopped down from Anders' shoulder, landing on the table. It stood at the edge as its projector shone upon the centre of the table. A rocky mountain formation, mostly unassuming apart from its grand stature. Atop it, however, sticking out like a sharp talon was a single dome-like structure.

"The Dark Ascent is the most heavily fortified location in Brotherhood space. It is the seat of power for the Council and the Iron Throne itself. There will be little I can do if negotiations go awry..."

Anders gestured to Buddy, the little droid powering down its holoprojector.

"I'm coming with you," Draca folded his arms across his chest. BUDD-E let out a loud whine, stamping its mechanical feet excitedly on the table like an excited puppy.

Draca couldn't help but smile. The little droid had a way of making light of the bleakest of situations. He pointed at it.

"So is he."

"You most certainly are not," Anders shot a glance at BUDD-E. "Neither of you are."

The droid visibly deflated.

Anders placed his hands behind his back. "When we get to Arx, you are both staying with the ship. That's not a request, it's an order. For your own good, you are not to get involved. Understood?"

"What!? But—"

"Am. I. Understood?"

"Anders," Draca deadpanned him. "Do you honestly expect us to do that? We aren't leaving you. We're a team. Teams stick together. You taught me that."

Draca didn't know when he became so bold, but there was no way he was letting Anders walk into near-certain doom by himself, not if he could do something to prevent the worst-case scenario from happening.

BUDD-E stamped its little mechanical leg on the table.

"Seriously? You too?" Anders asked.

"You know we won't take no for an answer," Draca said. "And neither will I."

The Chiss looked back and forth between Draca and BUDD-E, finally leaning his head back to release an exasperated groan.

"Fine... *Fine!* You can both come."

Draca smiled as BUDD-E sounded a series of happy beeps and boops, dancing on the table before leaping back on Anders' shoulder. It nestled its head into his shoulder.

"But!" Anders pointed a finger at Draca. "You will do everything I say without question."

Draca mock saluted. "Yes, sir."

"I'm serious," Anders steeled his gaze.

"I know. I promise I'll be on the best behaviour, and so will Buddy. Right, Buddy?"

The little droid beeped excitedly.

"See?"

Anders pinched the bridge of his nose. "Why do I have a feeling I'm going to regret this?"

Draca went to embrace Anders in a hug, but stopped when he saw the Chiss' gaze shoot towards him.

Right, Anders didn't like hugs.

He instead settled for placing a hand on Anders' shoulder. "Come on. How bad could it be?"

The Inquisitor rolled his eyes. "You have no idea..."

Chapter 4

Arx
Dark Ascent
41 ABY

In all his young life, Draca had never ventured anywhere so monumentally grand. The antechamber truly was a testament to the Brotherhood's might and wealth. Everywhere Draca looked, he saw various ornaments made out of everything from beskar to solid gold. He was transfixed, slack-jawed, and not even the numerous guards wielding Force-pikes were enough to stop his gawking. The Dark Ascent brought with it a nauseous pressure in the air, like the weight of the galaxy was concentrated in one place upon his young shoulders.

He swallowed the lump that formed in his throat. It was powerful, complex...

Overwhelming. It stank of the dark side of the Force. Draca had never felt anything like it before. Not even Anders commanded such strength.

"Hurry up, Draca."

The young man snapped to attention. He hadn't realised he'd failed to keep pace with Anders until he'd heard his voice calling to him. He quickly hurried by his side as the turbolift doors opened. The two men, along with BUDD-E on Anders' shoulder, stepped inside, the lift shuddering as it began to ascend.

"Remember what I said. Do not speak unless you are spoken to. Do not make eye contact. Do not so much as breath heavily. Am I clear? That means you too, Buddy. Let me do all the talking."

Draca nodded. He dared not speak, like he had somehow forgotten how to. It was like the dark side's strength had removed his tongue from his mouth.

The doors of the turbolift opened, with Anders and Draca walking down the dimly lit corridor in front of them. Their footsteps timed with the beats of Draca's hearts in his ears. The young man's eyes widened when they came across a large, hairy, broad-shouldered being in front of a set of large durasteel doors.

A Wookiee. Draca had never seen one so massive. It towered over them, huffing through its nose. Anders stood up front with BUDD-E whimpering on his shoulder.

The Chiss folded his arms behind his back and smiled. "Good afternoon, I am here to see the Voice. I think you will find I have the necessary clearance."

The Wookiee responded by roaring in his face.

All of Draca's training kicked into gear, his instincts taking over as he reached for his lightsabers. He had them in his hands, ready to leap into action to defend his friend and mentor.

"For frack's sake, Rayjax. Just let them in."

The sudden voice stopped him in his tracks. The Wookiee huffed, but stood aside, allowing them entry. Draca released the breath he was holding as they walked into what he assumed was the Voice's office.

He was wrong. So very wrong...

The space opened up into a large octagonal chamber. Several faces peered down from above upon them. Draca felt like a small ant under their intense gazes. Questions raced through his mind.

What was this? What was going on? Who were these people?

"Sorry about him, he's not much of an indoor guy. I keep telling him he can go outside, but he doesn't want to leave me alone. Loyal to a fault."

The Human those words belonged to was one of two Mandalorians present, a datapad in his hands. He was tall and slender, not unlike Anders, though he

appeared to only shave periodically, given the messy stubble and goatee upon his face.

He was Idris Adenn, Voice of the Brotherhood.

A loud scoff could be heard from an adjacent seat. "He could at least get us some food."

"Now, now, Howlader. We can satiate your appetite later. We have more important matters to attend to."

That voice commanded immediate respect, and the room fell silent. The shorter-than-average Human male with dark-amber hair gestured towards the centre floor.

"Now... *kneel*."

Anders dropped to one knee, pain grasping his body as it trembled. The Force lighting up like a fire within him, burning him from the inside out.

"Anders, NO!" Draca was at his side almost immediately. "LET HIM GO!"

"Child, you do not know who you are speaking with," a bulky Mirialan spoke, arms folded across his chest, a tinge of sadness in his eyes. "Please, for your own sake, stand down."

"We know who you are," a woman with striking silver hair said. "Chief Inquisitor Anderson, previously a sky-walker within the Chiss Ascendancy. You will do well to remember to only speak when you are asked to do so. Who is the boy?"

"He is my... companion, Headmistress. He... travels with me..."

Draca's hearts stopped beating. He went wide-eyed. The Grand Master himself was here, and so was his Council. This had to be the Council Chamber!

But, why?

Draca thought they were only meeting with the Voice.

He didn't like this, not one bit. His head was spinning more than a flock of mynock in space. It looked like Anders was being torn apart from the inside-out. BUDD-E had leapt down from Anders' shoulder and was frantically pacing around them.

Idris threw his datapad down. "Unfortunately, you have shown a lack of care towards mission parameters, Anderson. You kill when you need to capture, and compromise Brotherhood security using your warped sense of justice whenever you see fit. You've gone rogue one too many times."

"A pity. Didn't I hear that he has beaten Grand Inquisitors in sparring sessions? Quite a rare feat for one in the lower ranks. *Someone* likes to punch above their weight," another voice chimed in, coming from the smiling face of James Lucius Entar.

"HE HAS! HE HAS SHOWN CLASS AND HONOUR IN HIS DUELLING ABILITIES! I HAVE WITNESSED IT FIRST-HAND!"

"Yes, thank you, Rajhin..." Dacian Victae pinched the bridge of his nose.

Anders choked for air, he clutched at his ribs, gasping and wheezing. Draca held his hands on his back, pouring the soothing energy of the Force into him, trying to combat *whatever* it was that the Grand Master was doing to him.

"Honour? His lack of respect for completing mission parameters and disregarding objectives speaks otherwise," the second Mandalorian folded his arms across his chest as he spoke, the unmistakable insignia of the Regent, Zxyl Venzos, glimmering in the light.

"Regardless, that is why we brought him here, as we have discussed several times already," Darth Nehalem said, letting out a heavy sigh. "Chief Inquisitor, despite your... *history*, we would like to present you with an opportunity to redeem yourself."

The Grand Master finally released his grip on Anders, who fell onto his hands.

"You may help him to his feet, boy," Darth Nehalem placed his hand back on his lap, his gaze damning.

BUDD-E whined as Anders was slowly helped upright courtesy of Draca. The young Jedi couldn't believe how weak Anders felt compared to the Brotherhood's Grand Master. He had *never* seen Anders be manhandled like that before. He was used to seeing Anders as the most powerful, or intelligent man in the room. He always had an answer.

Not this time, and the thought frightened him more than any battlefield scenario he'd faced up until now.

Anders had always protected him. Now, however, they were as powerless as shaak in a den of rock-lions.

"We have discovered a location known as the *Ethereal Realm*. You are to investigate it, learn all you can, and report back," Idris said.

"So far, all we have is that it is *spooky*," James made a gesture with his fingers.

"And *haunted*," Idris finished. "Don't forget that part.

"We believe this to be the location of the Children of Mortis," Alethia stated. "And perhaps Grand Master Cantor."

Darth Nehalem seethed. "You will report back with any findings you uncover. Failure is not an option."

"And if I... refuse?" Anders asked.

"*Death*."

The answer came from the last man in the room to speak, the newly knighted Darth Renuus, Justicar of the Brotherhood. He'd been watching, observing the events unfold with an almost uninterested expression plastered on his face. It matched the disinterested tone of his voice perfectly.

"Then it appears... I have little choice but to accept," Anders hung his head low.

"Very good," Idris said. "We will have you escorted to a private preparation room where you can prepare. We will collect you once the portal is ready."

Chapter 5

Preparation Room

Dark Ascent

41 ABY

"A portal!? Are you kidding me!? How in all the Force did they even create such a thing!?"

"Draca, calm down."

"They can't just do this to you, can they? There's got to be a way out. There's got to be something... anything!"

"Draca..."

"Maybe we could run? We could take the *Astral Drake* before they even realise we are gone..."

"Draca!"

The young Jedi tensed at Anders' scolding. They, along with BUDD-E, were the only beings in the room along with a couple of chairs and a table. It felt more like a prison than a room to prepare for a mission, Anders being like a prisoner awaiting his execution.

The little droid hopped up on Draca's shoulders, nestling its head into his shoulder. Draca patted the little droid on its head.

"Those people inside that chamber are the most powerful beings in the Brotherhood. If we so much as take a step outside those doors without permission, we will be destroyed on the spot."

Draca slumped against the wall, dragging his hands down his face. His foot tapped against the duracrete floor.

"Cut that out. It's annoying."

"I'm trying to make a plan," Draca frowned at Anders. "You don't seem too worried about this whole mess."

"It's simple," Anders smiled at him. "I'm better at hiding it than you are."

"I'm not joking," Draca folded his arms across his chest.

"I never said I was," Anders deadpanned.

"You've got to have a plan. You always do. That's why you're so calm. You must have *something* up your sleeves. Buddy, help me out here."

BUDD-E hopped down onto the table, its mechanical legs tapping against the durasteel as it approached Anders, tilting its head at an angle in an attempt to look as cute as possible for its master. It released a set of light beeps.

Anders stroked BUDD-E gently on the side of its head. "Unfortunately, my little friend, I don't have anything this time. Every scenario I can imagine ends with us being destroyed in one way or another."

BUDD-E lowly whined as Draca's heart plummeted into his gut. "Mind Tricks aren't going to be enough this time, are they?"

"It's why they left us with our weapons. They know any resistance will be met with complete annihilation. The only realistic option is to go through with their plan and hope to return."

"So..." Draca's arms dropped by his sides. "We are going through the portal."

"We?" Anders stood up from his seat. "We? Absolutely not. I was right that you should have stayed with the ship. The Grand Master could have had you killed on the spot for lashing out at him. I should have known you would act impulsively. I never should have let you come."

"He was hurting you!"

"Do you take me for someone who can't handle a bit of pain?"

"What? Of course not! But..."

"You got *lucky*, Draca. Nothing more, nothing less. The Grand Master could have had you executed on the spot and there would have been nothing neither you nor I could have done about it. I will appeal for you to return to the ship before I enter the portal. That's my decision, and it is final. That goes for you too, Buddy."

The little droid protested on the table.

"Anders! We..."

"No!" Anders slammed an open palm onto the table, startling both the Jedi and the droid. "This time you will both listen to me! I am trying to protect you, why is that so hard to see!?"

A credit being dropped could have been heard with how quiet the room went. The only sound to be heard was Anders' heavy breathing after his sudden outburst.

Draca moved around the table, pulling out a chair and sitting opposite Anders.

"Do you seriously think after all this time that I would just abandon you?"

Anders let out a heavy sigh. "Draca, listen to me..."

"No! You listen to me!" Draca didn't know when he became so bold. He almost startled himself as much as he had startled Anders. "You took me in after my enclave was destroyed. It burned in front of me, and I can still smell the smoke when I close my eyes. I can still feel the heat on my skin. You took me in when I had nowhere else to go. You trained me, let me make my own choices, and forged me into who I am today out of the kindness in your heart."

Anders scoffed at that.

"Scoff if you want, Anders, but I know the truth. You aren't as bad as you think you are, not really. I owe you my life. You saved me, and now it's my turn to save you."

"That's why you stayed with me all this time?" Anders raised a brow. "Because you owe me a life debt? I simply did not want to abandon a child in need. You owe me nothing."

Draca smiled. "And that is where we differ. I owe you *everything*. I won't abandon you. Not now, not ever. You're like a father to me."

He watched the Chiss visibly tense. For this first time, Draca could see himself breaking through the mental barriers Anders kept up to protect himself emotionally. The Chiss had always been unyielding, unbreakable, like a wall of beskar.

The doors to their room suddenly opened. "The portal is ready. The Council is ready to see you now."

It didn't take tapping into the Force to figure out that the words from the guard were more an order than a request. Draca knew it, and so did Anders. The latter rose from his seat, dusting himself down. He didn't say a word, not to Draca, nor BUDD-E. The look on his face was something Draca had seldom seen from the Chiss the entire time he'd known him.

Conflict.

There was something Anders wanted to say, the Force feeding Anders' emotional state to Draca. Pain, fear, and most importantly, *regret*. It flooded the young Zabrak's mind like a dam with cracks in its walls.

Before he could ask, Anders was already on the move. He needed to follow him, and quickly.

"Come on, Buddy."

The droid hopped up on Draca's shoulder as they quickly raced after the Chief Inquisitor before he got too far ahead of them.

Before he went into the portal without them...

Chapter 6

Council Chamber

Dark Ascent

41 ABY

Catching up to Anders was fairly easy, though no matter how much he asked, the Chiss avoided answering Draca's questions directly, promising to talk later about it all.

It would have infuriated the young Zabrak, if he hadn't become gobsmacked by what he saw the moment they re-entered the Council Chamber.

A literal rip in the Force, massive, and *powerful*. The sensations flooded him, neither light nor dark, but just... *there*, in all of its splendour. Ambivalent light shone through, flashing, dimming, and then cracking like a mirror before repairing itself. It felt heavy, like the weight of several worlds was being presented in front of them.

Draca had never felt anything like it before, and judging by the look on Anders' face, neither had he. He didn't know if he should be reassured about that or not, given they were about to walk through it to the *Ethereal Realm*, whatever *that* entailed.

Never had Anders' training left him feeling so woefully underprepared.

"Is the boy going with you?"

The question was a genuine one from the Regent, given this was Anders' assignment, not Draca's. The Chiss was about to give his answer when he locked eyes with Draca.

The Jedi folded his arms, daring him to say no. He wasn't leaving his side whether he had his permission or not.

Anders sighed in resignation, then looked to Zxyl. "Yes, Regent. He is coming with me. The droid too. It will record everything on the inside."

BUDD-E, not being able to sense the Force, blissfully unaware of Draca's inner turmoil, gave a happy chirp at that comment, leaping from Draca's shoulder to Anders'.

"Very well," Zxyl gave a curt nod.

"VENTURE FORTH, BRAVE SOULS!"

"Rajhin, please show *some* restraint..." Dacian pinched the bridge of his nose with his hand.

The last pair of eyes peered upon them, the most powerful within the room, cutting through everyone else like a lightsaber through flesh.

"Do not disappoint me."

The unsaid '*or else*' did not escape Draca or Anders. With one final look at one another, they took the first steps through the portal, Anders entering first with BUDD-E, followed closely by Draca.

Chapter 7

Ethereal Realm

41 ABY

Draca felt nauseous.

He had never expected it to be so jarring. The world around him shook as he took his first steps into the *Ethereal Realm*.

He had no idea how to describe it. Everything around them existed like part of a cold mist he could put his hand through. There were vast oceans around them, but they contained not water, but *memories* from the Force and all those that it touched. He could hear the whispers coming from it, frozen moments in time that they drifted through like paintings, perfect in every detail, dreams and memories made into physical reality.

Spooky and haunted didn't do it justice.

"What is this place?" Draca was hesitant to ask, but the words slipped out of his mouth. His voice, though quiet in tone, seemed to echo into the ether.

Anders didn't look at Draca when he answered. "I have no idea."

At least that made two of them.

Truthfully, Draca didn't know if he was fearful, or in awe of this realm. Perhaps it was a bit of both as he gazed upon the floating structures and rocks that hovered around them.

Anders, for his part, seemed to eye this spectral place with a morbid curiosity. Draca knew that the Chiss had an affinity with Sith Alchemy, and he didn't know if the fact Anders didn't know anything about this was good or bad as a result, especially as they made their way through the never-ending fog. How far did it go on?

It was impossible to tell.

Before Draca could contemplate further, the haze ahead of them began to clear, revealing a black-stoned structure the likes of which he had never seen before. A castle of the Force, dark in appearance, like its soul had been corrupted by those that dwelled within.

"It appears as if we are being expected."

Draca did *not* think that was a good thing. If they were being expected, then that means they were prepared. If that was the case, they were playing right into the enemy's hands, an enemy that had proven beyond doubt that they would do anything to destroy the Brotherhood and those associated with it.

Facing down the Council almost felt preferable.

Anders straightened himself, placing his hands behind his back as he took a step forward. The moment the sole of his boot touched the ground, the large doors to the castle slid open in front of them, granting them entry.

A chilling wind descended upon them both, the result of the darkness Draca could sense coming from within.

BUDD-E recoiled, whimpering lowly as it peered over Anders' shoulder.

"It'll be OK, Buddy," Anders gave the droid a gentle pat on its head before turning back to Draca. "Same rules apply. Do exactly what I say. Do not speak unless you are spoken to, and keep your senses open."

"It's them, isn't it? The Children of Mortis?" Draca asked, though deep down, he already knew the answer.

Who else would live in a sinister castle within an ether of the Force?

"You don't think they'll just attack us?" Draca then asked.

Anders shook his head. "They've had every chance to do so whilst we've been here. If they were going to kill us, they would have done so already. They have other motives."

They would try to stop Anders and Draca if they tried to leave now. They were already in too deep.

"This is a trap," Draca claimed.

"Indeed," Anders didn't bother denying it.

"So, what's the plan?"

"Isn't it obvious?" For the first time in a while, Anders shot him a genuine smile. "We spring the trap."

Chapter 8

Ethereal Realm

Castle Courtyard

41 ABY

Noise pierced their ears the moment they entered the castle. Neither Anders nor Draca truly had a grasp on the scale of it, but judging by the deafening cheers as they entered the courtyard, it was larger than either of them had realised.

The circular castle courtyard appeared before them, surrounded by the crystalline abominations that belonged to the Children of Mortis, many of which looked to be chomping at the bit to take a swing at them. Raptors, terentateks, rancors, and more lined the walls of the courtyard. They jeered, lashing out, their ire stoked, searching for an excuse to kill them on the spot.

It was deafening. Draca found it hard to process as he trailed closer behind Anders. When did they all get here? Why were they here? Was the castle bigger on the inside? The more they saw, the more unanswered questions they had.

Eventually, the pair of Force-wielders and the droid spotted a large, black Throne, surrounded by three individuals. Draca had never met them in person, but all the Inquisitorius had been given information about the Children of Mortis leadership, which meant by proxy, so did Draca via Anders.

Rose Telsniw, the Seer in the Darkness.

J'hon Whetu, the Harbinger of Light.

Loremi P'sum, the Arbiter of Truth.

Sitting on the Throne was something, or *someone* that Draca could only describe as a near-skeletal husk. Green eyes glared back at them as boney fingers scratched their chin. It raised a single hand, silencing the creatures around them before they began to vanish.

An illusion, masterfully done to serve as an intimidation tactic.

"I'm insulted. The Brotherhood sends an Inquisitor, not even grand in rank, and their pup to meet me. Was your *Voice* not impressed with what he saw? Either the Brotherhood does not perceive me as a threat, or they foolishly overestimate their power."

"Perhaps it is both, my Lord?" J'hon gave an unerring smile.

"Yes, indeed, Harbinger."

Draca went wide-eyed. How did...

"I knew everything about you the moment you stepped through the portal into my domain. Who do you think created this realm?"

That was impossible! There was no way...

"Foolish boy. I have lived for thousands of years. There is so much about the Force you fail to comprehend. It exists in all shades of the universe, light, dark, and everything in a spectrum so eternal that looking upon it would blind you."

Anders took several steps forward. "I would hardly call what you do, what you are, living."

Rose sneered at him. "You be quiet! You are in the presence of greatness! You will speak only when *The Father* says you can!"

A coy smile appeared on Anders' face. "Are you too gutless to address me yourself? Or do you need to hide behind your lackeys?"

"Like your *Council* is hiding behind you?" Loremi chimed in.

He did have a point...

To her credit, the Seer stopped sneering at him, her lips curving into a twisted, malevolent smirk. Loremi, however, was quick to reveal his weapon, followed by J'hon and Rose as they skulked forward towards them.

"We will defend *The Father's* honour."

"Stand down. All of you."

The Mortis leaders obeyed their *Father* without a single moment's hesitation, bowing to him as they returned to their spots.

"Those are brave words for someone who is so very clearly outnumbered and outmatched. However, if it is conflict that you seek, then it is conflict you shall have."

The Father stood from his Throne, his lithe frame visible for all to see. He undid the buttons on his shirt, revealing a figure that looked ready to drop dead from starvation any second.

Draca wondered how one could live in such a state, even with the Force sustaining him, it wasn't a life worth living.

"However, I am nothing if not fair. Draw your weapon, inquisitor. You are familiar with the etiquette of duelling, yes? Face me. If you win, I'll let you and your companions go."

He got his answers when he saw the eminent glow of crystals protruding from his flesh like daggers poking out from within his body. The power they radiated was unlike anything Draca had ever seen, sending shivers down the young Jedi's spine.

"Buddy, go to Draca."

He snapped to attention when he saw Anders place BUDD-E on the ground. The little droid hopped over to him, standing by his side as Anders undid the clasps on his cloak, letting it fall to the ground.

Draca wanted nothing more than to assist him in this fight, but decided against it. If there was one thing Anders prized over nearly anything else, it was the etiquette of a one-on-one duel. The Chiss would skin him alive if he interfered without good reason.

Draca would watch like an ebon hawk for that reason to get involved, though. He didn't know why, but he had a very bad feeling about all of this, like the Force was trying to tell him something. It wasn't so much a warning, but a feeling that dug into the pit of his stomach. He bit his upper lip, his hands grazing the metallic hilts on his belt.

Snap-Hiss!

The crimson blade snapped out of Anders' hilt. He placed one hand behind his back and brought his blade up to his face in front of him.

Draca recognised the stance he had seen thousands of times in his training under Anders: the *Makashi Salute*.

The Father responded in kind with a smirk on his face and his lightsaber in his hand. He activated his weapon, brimstone-yellow blades appearing out of the hilt as the crossguards rose from a vertical to horizontal position.

Anders scoffed. "Is that lightsaber just for show, or to make up for a woeful lack of skill?"

Draca rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, remembering the countless number of times Anders had lectured him about his use of two lightsabers instead of just one.

However, he then spotted the crystals on *The Father's* chest begin to glow.

Thankfully, the Chiss appeared to spot it too, shielding his eyes from the blinding light as it shone forth towards him. An illusion. Simple, yet effective.

A guttural scream erupted from the Children of Mortis leader as he launched himself forward, the distraction creating an opportunity to strike. Draca wasn't sure if Anders felt or saw the attack coming, though, it mattered not. The Chiss manoeuvred himself to the side, the *Father's* vertical swing hitting nothing but air.

Anders had dodged the lethal strike, and countered with one of his own. It was seamless, flawless, done with an economy of motion. Draca was convinced the fight was over as quickly as it began as the Inquisitor's blade inches towards the *Father's* neck.

That is, until the Mortis leader twisted his body in a way only the Force allowed, narrowly avoiding the attack.

The *Father* pressed on with his assault, exploding at Anders with a flurry of attacks before backing away, defending himself from the Chiss' pinpoint counters, the dance of yellow and red lighting up the courtyard in all its splendour.

It didn't take Draca long to pinpoint the Human's use of *Vaapad*, and by the look of it, it didn't take Anders long either. The Chiss struck again, but not with the Force. He lanced forth with his own natural agility and elegance, years of experience culminating into one of the finest lightsaber duelists within the Inquisitorius.

Draca silently wondered what Anders was doing. Wouldn't his attacks be stronger and faster with the Force behind them? It didn't make any sense to him as he watched the two fight, observing Anders dance back and forth like a snake snapping back and forth against an invader.

Then it clicked.

He watched frustration grow on the Human's face. Anders was enhancing then weakening his strikes to break the superconducting loop created by the *Father's* Vaapad style.

Draca couldn't stop himself from smiling. Even after eleven years, Anders still could surprise him. There was always something he could learn.

Their lightsabers locked together, with Anders shaking his head. "I'm disappointed. My superiors hold you in such high esteem regarding your power. Yet, I find you lacking in it."

"Do you truly believe you can defeat me? The embodiment of the Children of Mortis?"

"If this is the best *you* have, then I dread the incompetence of those in your charge. Perhaps you are not the threat you think you are?"

The Chiss' lightsaber carefully positioned the crossguard out of the way during their verbal exchange.

Anders pounced like a sand-panther, flawlessly precise, impossibly elegant...

Graceful and deadly.

He was like a scalpel, cutting away at the *Father's* defences until there was nothing left of it but ribbons. The Human, by comparison, was like a hammer, trying to smash his way into Anders' blade with staccato sequences so random in order to force an opening.

Hope.

That was what Draca felt as he watched the two fight. By all accounts, Anders was faster, more accurate, and used the lightsaber form created for the sole purpose of lightsaber combat. He *should* have had the advantage.

Yet, all of a sudden, he didn't.

Something was wrong, very, very wrong. Draca could *feel* it, like a shift in the air chilling the hairs on his arms. Anders was getting slower, and sloppier. His footwork became predictable, his breathing ragged like he'd been fighting an endless battle all day.

Then the *Father* struck.

"No!"

Draca's hearts plummeted to the soles of his feet as he watched Anders stagger back. His left arm had been hit. It was only a tap, but it was all that was needed to cause Anders a loss of mobility in his limb.

The Chiss hissed like a cornered feline, sweat dripping from his brow. He looked himself up and down, then went wide-eyed.

"I see you've figured it out. Unfortunately for you, it is too little too late."

The brimstone-yellow blade crashed into crimson-red, knocking it to a side. Anders was wide open, weak, and unable to defend himself from the strike that destroyed his hilt.

He was now unarmed and defenceless.

"Now, kneel."

Anders struggled to fight against the suggestion as it wormed its way through his subconscious. His body trembled, his face scrunching, his eyes tightly shut as he fought against every impulse in his body. Inevitably, he crumbled, dropping to his knees in front of *The Father*.

"Very good. At least now you know your place."

Rose laughed behind them, with the Arbiter and Harbinger holding smirks on their faces. Draca looked back and forth between them, his breathing increasing in pace.

"Believe it or not, Chief Inquisitor, I do not wish to kill you. In fact, I acknowledge your skill with the blade. You have talent that is wasted serving Masters who do not appreciate your worth. Join me, and together, we will deliver righteous justice upon the galaxy, starting with the Brotherhood."

Those words were expertly woven. They were designed to appeal to Anders' lust for justice. Truth be told, Draca didn't know what Anders was going to do. For a Sith, the prospect of recognition, power, and fulfilling his end goal must have been tempting. *The Father* extended his hand out to him.

Would Anders turn his back on everything to achieve it?

The Chiss slapped the hand away from him. "Unlike you... I have standards."

The Father shook his head.

"Standards mean nothing when you are dead. Nevertheless, you have made your choice. Goodbye, Chief Inquisitor."

The Human raised his weapon to strike Anders down. BUDD-E released a panicked cry...

Snap-hiss!

Draca roared, leaping in with Force amplified mobility, using his twin sapphire lightsabers to stop *The Father's* weapon before it split Anders' skull.

"**Brave, boy, but foolish,**" the Human smiled softly at him. "**You wouldn't be doing this if you knew the truth.**"

The Jedi had no intention of listening to him. He was not about to sit back and watch the man who raised him, took care of him, and trained him for the last eleven years die in front of his eyes whilst he stood and watched. If they died here, then they would die together as Master and student, in Draca's eyes.

He thrust forward an open palm, a blast of Force energy slamming into *The Father* as he careered backwards towards his Throne. He backfired, skidding across the ground, coming to a stop in front of his subordinates.

He glanced at them. "**Do not interfere.**" He then charged forward.

Draca met *The Father's* advance with his own.

"Draca, no!"

He ignored Anders' plea. Yellow-brimstone collided with blue, sparking and hissing as Draca pushed against him.

The Force was on his side as Draca pressed forward with the momentum of a runaway podracer. His blade moved at impressive speed, slashing, weaving, and cutting at him with unrelenting aggression.

His blades became a blur in motion with each step Draca took a strike, and each strike was a step. The young Jedi was unrelenting, like a war droid whose sole purpose was to destroy what was in front of him. Every time *The Father* tried to build up momentum, Draca cut it off with an impressive display of acrobatic manoeuvring so fitting for his youth. He ducked, weaved, dodged, and overwhelmed his opponent's defences.

The Mortis leader backed away, slightly ragged for breath. His fight with Anders had taken its toll on him, giving Draca the physical advantage. Though, to the Zabrak's surprise, *The Father* retracted his lightsaber and started...

Clapping?

"Impressive. You display a level of proficiency with Ataru and Jar'Kai above your years. Anderson has indeed trained you well. However..."

He dropped his hands to his sides. **"I doubt you would defend him if you knew the truth of his actions."**

"I know what he does," Draca said, holding his lightsabers in front of him. "I came to accept it a long time ago."

"I'm not talking about his sense of justice. I'm talking about when he met you. He never told you the truth about what happened to your enclave, did he?"

Draca steeled himself. "I will not listen to your lies!"

He lunged forward.

"Not even if I tell you that *he* is the one responsible for its destruction?"

Draca's lightsabers stopped millimetres from cleaving *The Father* in twain.

"You... you're lying. Anders wouldn't..."

"You and I both know that he most definitely could, and would, given the chance."

Draca peered at Anders, wide-eyed, mouth slightly agape, his gaze piercing into the older man's soul. Yet, perhaps the worst of all was the fact that Anders did not attempt a rebuttal. He remained on his knees, making eye-contact with him.

"As I said, the moment you stepped into this realm, your lives became open books for me to read. Every page told me everything I needed to know, including his deepest, darkest secret. The *one* thing he has kept from you for the past eleven years. Perhaps it would be better if I showed you instead?"

The Human raised his hands, the crystals upon his chest glowing as the world around them appeared to distort and warp, changing into a landscape Draca recognised almost immediately. They say distance made the heart grow fonder, and that was certainly the case for his home planet.

Iridonia.

If Draca didn't know any better, he would have sworn it was real. The wind blew through his hair, the sun beat down from the sky.

Home.

He hadn't seen it since he left with Anders eleven years ago, not since...

A great fire erupted like a volcano in the distance, blackening the sky above. It drew Draca to it immediately, the memories coursing through him, making him numb, and weak at the knees. His conclave burned along with every Jedi Master and Padawan within. It was the place he learned about the face, and grew alongside others like himself.

It was all consumed in flames.

The visage of several individuals ran out of the conclave, screaming, fleeing from the carnage. Several individuals surrounded them, cornering them, trapping them, red lightsabers ignited in crimson wrath as they butchered the Jedi Masters and teachers within their circle of death.

Draca wanted to look away, to see anything else, do *anything* else other than relive that massacre all over again. Yet, a pair of blood-red eyes glued his eyes to the scene. There was no mistaking the blue skin, and that curved hilt.

He was much younger, yes, but there was no mistaking Anders when he saw him. He watched as the man he grew to love as a father figure butcher those closest to him with merciless efficiency. The Jedi that put up a defence were slaughtered swiftly by his blade, as well as from his fellow Sith.

The Chiss seemed to speak something to them, like a chief to their brigade. The group walked away, satisfied with their murder, except for one...

Anders himself.

He stood watching the scene unfolding. If Draca had to guess, he wanted to ensure the conclave was destroyed, and that there were no survivors.

That was when a small Zabrak boy, no older than eight years old, appeared on the scene. He dropped to his knees and started wailing at the wanton destruction. He hadn't seen Anders at this point, being too consumed by grief.

The Chiss approached the young boy, having grabbed his lightsaber hilt.

Yet, he didn't kill him. Instead, he dropped to his knees and started talking to him. Just words, and no violence.

The start of the mentorship of Draca under Anders, and the start of his eleven-year lie.

The air swirled around them, the scene melting away back into the courtyard they were in minutes prior.

Draca's head snapped towards Anders, teeth bare and moisture forming in his eyes. "How much of that is true?"

Anders carefully pulled himself to his feet, still clutching the wound on his arm. He stepped towards him. "Draca, I..."

He stopped when Draca's pointed one of his lightsabers at him.

"You told me a cult worshipping the Nightsisters did it. Y-You told me you were there to investigate the fire," tears rolled down Draca's cheeks. He choked on his own words, but continued to speak. "H-How much of it is true? How much of the last eleven years have been true? Did you kill them?"

"Draca, don't listen to him. He's using you!"

"ANSWER ME!"

Draca heaved, his shoulders tense, his hands shaking as he maintained an ironclad grip on his weapon.

"Yes, I did... it is true."

The words cut through Draca more than any lightsaber ever could. His entire being numbed as the weight of the confession coursed into his soul.

Anders took another step forward. "Draca, what you need to understand is that the Brotherhood was a very different place. Jedi were not as tolerated as they are now..."

"SHUT UP!" Draca wailed, his pupils dilated, the tears flowing like rivers down his face. "You... You said you took me in to protect me, to make me strong!"

"I didn't lie about that..."

"DO. NOT. LIE TO ME!" Draca could barely see Anders through the gaze of tears. "You care so much about justice, Anders. WHERE WAS MY JUSTICE!?"

"He took you in not because of a desire to protect you, but because of *guilt*. Many lost their lives that day, including children whose loss of life he was indirectly responsible for. He cares so much about justice, and yet, denies you yours for what he did. This, in his eyes, was his way of atoning for his sins. He never truly cared about you."

The Father placed a hand on Draca's shoulder, prompting Anders forward.

"Get your hand off of him!"

Anders was promptly surrounded. The Harbinger grabbed hold of his right arm whilst the Arbiter grabbed hold of his left, forcing him back onto his knees. The Seer cackled maniacally as she grabbed a small, ritualistic dagger from her person.

"I've been looking forward to this," she said, locking her lips as she raised the dagger above her head.

"Seer in the darkness, halt what you are doing immediately. "

The Father's voice gave pause to the proceedings, drawing everyone's attention. The Seer grimaced, but otherwise obeyed.

"This justice is not ours to enact, but Draca's. What is it you wish to do, young man? I will honour your judgement, whatever it may be."

"Draca, please... can't you see he's manipulating you!?" Anders pleaded, not for his life, but for the young man he'd taken care of for the last eleven years to see a modicum of sense. BUDD-E hopped in between them, beeping and whirring in front of Draca.

It didn't work, the young man was tunnel-visioned, his focus squarely on the Chiss in front of him.

"Even after everything..." Draca said, his voice low, but easily heard amongst the group of six as he deactivated his weapon. "He... he still looked after me all this time. So, I'll show him the one thing he has never shown to anyone else; *mercy*. I never want to see you again, Anders, or else..."

"Draca... please..."

"Or. *Else*. I mean it. You want my forgiveness, Anders? This is my golden rule."

They stared at each other, Anders holding a startled expression on his face whilst Draca's was stern, formed by the horrors of betrayal.

The Father clasped his hands together. "You heard the young man. Arbiter, have this Brotherhood dog and his droid thrown back through the portal to his Masters. Let them see all we have here and *fear* it. Let this be their warning, inquisitor. We do not fear the Brotherhood. They should fear us."

Loremi bowed. "It will be done, my Lord."

Anders didn't have the strength to fight back against the Arbiter's grip. He screamed calling after Draca again and again until his voice became nothing but a mere echo in the courtyard. BUDD-E followed after him, but glanced back to Draca, drooping its head as it vanished into the distance.

The Father clasped a hand on Draca's shoulder. "Young Draca, what is it you wish to do now?"

Draca peered towards the ground, tears rolling off of his face, the little droplets of water staining the floor beneath his feet.

"I... I don't know."

That was the truth. Up to this point, his entire life had been controlled by Anders. He was all alone for the first time. The emptiness tore at him, threatening to rip him asunder where he stood.

"You need not be alone, Draca. I could have drained your life force much like I did the inquisitor, but I chose not to. I sense a greater destiny for you, unshackled and unchained. Among us, you can have a family again."

"I..."

Draca sobbed, the tears flowing harder and faster, rendering him speechless, he spun around, wrapping his arms around the Children of Mortis leader in a tight embrace, one which was reciprocated in kind as boney fingers wrapped around Draca.

"There, there," *The Father* soothed. "You are amongst your true family now. Harbinger."

J'hon approached them. "Yes, my Lord?"

"I believe Draca would be a perfect fit for the Lightbringers, wouldn't you agree?"

The Harbinger of Light smiled, baring his set of perfect, pearly white teeth. "Of course! Come along, Draca. Allow me to help you get settled in..."

J'hon wrapped his arm around Draca and escorted him from the courtyard.

"Rose."

The Seer was at his side in seconds. "Yes, my Lord?"

"I used far more power than I believed necessary during those fights."

A malevolent smirk curved on Rose's lips. "Oh? Is it time, my Lord? Shall I prepare the *Soul-Touched* for the ritual?"

The Father gave a curt nod. "Indeed. It is time to transfer my essence into a newer, more powerful vessel. Soon, the Brotherhood will fall, and with Avitus' body as my own, so will the Collective. The galaxy will feel our chains be broken."

Chapter 9

48 hours later

Arx

Dark Ascent

"You are free to go."

Anders understood the hidden meaning behind those words far better than anyone inside might have given him credit for.

He was free to go, but they were watching him.

How could he possibly blame them? Every precaution had to be taken, especially considering that he had come back through the portal *without* Draca. Questions were raised, the holo-recordings from BUDD-E were taken and analysed, and they were detained together until the Council were satisfied with everything they had seen.

It was all standard procedure, really.

Yet, the entire process irked him in a way that it never had before. He silently begged for it to end so he could be left with his thoughts without the intrusions from his fellow Inquisitorius agents and interrogators. Draca's impatience had seemingly rubbed off on him in ways he hadn't expected, especially as he snapped at agents higher ranked than himself.

Those acts garnered the attention of *Silver Eyes*, who had taken a particular interest in him after everything he had done amidst her ranks...

The ramp to the *Astral Drake* lowered upon Anders' arrival, tapping down upon the duracrete outside the Dark Ascent. Anders didn't look back as he entered the ship, and yet, immediately leaving wasn't his primary focus. He instead made his way to the private living quarters.

To Draca's room...

It hit Anders a lot harder than he had expected, like a hand was squeezing his heart, stifling him, refusing to let go. He hadn't realised he was tightly gripping the entryway until he took another step inside. It was amazing how much life this small room contained because of the one that inhabited it, and now that he wasn't here, it was strangely...

Empty?

No, that wasn't it.

Missing?

That was it. It was missing something now that couldn't be replaced no matter what he did. Everywhere he looked, it reminded him of Draca, whether it was his collections of books, his hologames, or the bed he had slept in for over a decade. It didn't matter. It held Anders in place like an invisible grip had anchored his feet to the ground. He took a deep breath, turned around, and forced himself to leave the room before the numbing feeling overtook him completely.

He took the lift to the cockpit, quickly taking note of the lack of an Ugnought body, likely due to the ship being inspected whilst he was detained. At least they had the courtesy to act as a clean-up crew and remove the corpse.

Good thing too. That would have stank the place up something grotesque.

Anders approached the pilot's seat, slouching into it before burying his face in his hands.

What had he done?

What *hadn't* he done?

He had intended to tell him the truth of what had happened on that fateful day, of course he did...

The timing just never felt right.

Anders always had some sort of excuse for not telling him, and then weeks turned into months, and months turned into years. The more time that passed, the harder it became to tell him because...

Because... he didn't want to lose him.

Anders was afraid, and that fear had cost him the person closest to him.

He'd become attached in the same way Draca had become attached to him. The young Zabrak was like the son he never had, and a part of Anders' soul wretched when he remembered the horrific look of betrayal on Draca's face.

"Sithspit..." Anders wasn't usually one for swears, but if ever there was a time, this was it.

BUDD-E hopped down from Anders' shoulder, looking up at him from the ground. It cooked its head, letting out a low beep.

"No, Buddy, I'm not OK. Draca is gone. He's been declared an enemy of the Brotherhood, and there's nothing I can do about it."

BUDD-E beeped again, causing Anders to shake his head.

"No, we are not going after him."

This answer caused the little droid to hop from one mechanical foot to the other, beeping and whirring like its existence depended on it.

"Buddy, even if I wanted to, I couldn't. The alchemy required to create the portal is beyond anything I've ever seen. Even if I *could* create it, there's no guarantee he would see reason. Draca has made his choice."

BUDD-E started beeping again.

"I said no, Buddy!" Anders snapped at the little droid, making it recoil slightly. "He's made his choice, there's nothing more to it!"

Anders spun in the seat and began preparations to launch the ship when, all of a sudden, he heard something behind him.

"I care about you, Draca."

It was like the blizzards of Hoth had frozen him in place for a few moments. He summoned the resolve to spin back around to face BUDD-E, only to discover the little droid was playing a recording, the recording of his and Draca's conversation in this very room from the other day.

Of course, BUDD-E had recorded the whole thing on Anders' orders, and, being the tempestuous little droid it was, it played that same sentence a second, and a third time, emphasising its point.

"That's enough."

BUDD-E shut off the recording, glancing up at Anders with what he assumed was a hopeful glance.

Anders let out a heavy sigh. "I failed, Buddy. He likely wants me dead now, and what's worse is that he's completely justified in it. I failed my ideals, and I failed *him*."

BUDD-E cooed lowly.

"They won't kill him," Anders was very confident in that. "If they are half as competent as we have seen, they will detect the potential the boy has. They will want him on the front lines when the time comes."

When that time came, what would Draca do? The boy wasn't loyal to a code, he was loyal to *people*. He was loyal to the people and friends he cared about most.

So that just left Anders. What would he do if, and when, the two crossed paths again? Anders had no doubt they would. The Force worked in mysterious ways, after all. The question is, would Draca be the same young man he'd raised since he was a child, or would be more like...

Like *them*?

Corrupted, monstrous, and crystallised?

Would Draca try to kill Anders?

Would Anders be able to kill Draca?

Anders' hands balled into fists. The Children of Mortis and their *Father*, this was all their fault. They twisted Draca, manipulated him masterfully, and turned the young boy against him. He felt a heat rise from within, feeding into his lust for justice, and, more importantly, *revenge*.

The dark side ignited like a flame within him, burning brightly, egging him on in desire for conquest, destruction, and retribution.

The Children of Mortis were going to regret the day they crossed Chief Inquisitor Anderson. He'd pathe the floors with their blood if that was what was required to retrieve Draca. His fury would overwhelm them like an exploding supernova.

They would rue the day they took Draca from him.

"Come along now, Buddy. If we are to see young Draca again, then preparations must be made."

The little droid happily hopped from one leg to the other before leaping back onto Anders' shoulder. The Chiss spun around in his seat, inputting the coordinates for the Caelus System into the terminals in front of him. The droid brain aboard the ship sprung into action as the ship took off, the Dark Ascent becoming a distant spec in short order.

Indeed, preparations would have to be made. Anders needed a new lightsaber, and then he needed to get back to training.

The starry void of space morphed into streaks as blue as the ship vanished into the eternal void of Hyperspace.

When the Children of Mortis next struck, Anders would be ready.

When he saw Draca, Anders would be ready.

On that, he didn't promise, he *guaranteed*.

-END-

